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Criticism Of 'JFK' Questioned

S.F. forum will explore media's reaction to film

By Michael Taylor
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A group of assassination theorists and other critics, fed up with what they say is a concerted effort by "the national media" to ridicule the controversial film "JFK," will stage a public forum in San Francisco tomorrow night to explore why an attempt has been made to discredit the film.

Sponsored by the Oakland-based magazine, Tikkun, the panel discussion will focus on the sensational charge by film director Oliver Stone that President Kennedy, who was assassinated in Dallas Nov. 22, 1963, was the victim of a high-level cabal of unnamed intelligence and military operatives. They are rumored in the film to be unhappy with Kennedy because they thought he intended to withdraw U.S. forces from Vietnam and abandon the war. More than 16,000 U.S. troops were in Vietnam at the time of the assassination.

Organizers of the forum said they believe it will be the first major gathering in the United States of people who have been caught up by the controversy since Stone's movie was released last month.

Before the film opened, The Washington Post questioned its authenticity and the way Stone allegedly played fast and loose with the official version of events.

After the movie was released, New York Times columnists Anthony Lewis, Tom Wicker and Leslie Gelb took Stone to task for what they thought was his trifling with the truth. The Times published news stories and a critical review of "JFK," as well as a defense of the movie by its director on the Op-Ed page. Newsweek magazine published a cover story on the movie, warning viewers to be wary of Stone's view of the assassination.

The thrust of much of the media criticism about "JFK" was that the movie not only discounted the Warren Commission's investigation of the assassination, but relied on former New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison's account as the most plausible explanation for Kennedy's death.

The Warren Commission, headed by the late U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren, concluded that Lee Harvey Oswald was the lone assassin in the Kennedy case. Garrison prosecuted the late New Orleans businessman Clay Shaw for conspiring with anti-Castro elements and others in a plot to kill Kennedy. Shaw was acquitted.

In 1979, the House Select Committee on Assassinations said Oswald shot Kennedy, but suggested that more than one gunman was involved and raised the possibility that organized crime had a hand in the murder.

Some lawmakers and others, spurred by the controversy that has erupted since Stone's film debuted, have joined Representative Louis Stokes, D-Ohio, former select committee chairman, in demanding that the panel's files on the investigation, which have been sealed until 2029, be opened to the public now.

Others who want the files released include former President Ford, who was a member of the Warren Commission; Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell, D-Maine; ex-FBI and CIA Director William Webster; and Representative Lee Hamilton, D-Ind.

In the Bay Area, Tikkun has put together a panel of assassination experts and social critics who will spend the evening dissecting the movie and the storm of controversy it has created.

"There has been a systematic attempt by virtually ever major columnist and news commentator in the news media to discredit this movie," said Michael Lerner, editor of Tikkun and one of the organizers of the panel.

Lerner said he will talk about the political impact of the movie, and Peter Gabel, president of New College of California, will discuss the film's cultural impact. Peter Dale Scott, an English professor at the University of California at Berkeley, who has written extensively about the Kennedy assassination as well as the war in Vietnam and the Iran-contra affair, will also participate.

The panel discussion will take place at 7:30 p.m., at the First Unitarian Church, 1187 Franklin Street. Admission is $10. Proceeds go to the nonprofit institute that owns Tikkun.